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ABSTRACT

Prior to about 1995, few secondary schools teachers outside the English KLA (Key Learning Areas) in Sydney's Catholic schools consciously focused on the development of literacy in their teaching approaches. By the mid-1990s however, a number of educational perspectives (e.g. genre approaches, teaching/learning cycles integrating content with literacy skills, different students' learning styles, explicit methods of teaching literacy) had converged to produce pedagogical approaches that were more concrete and more easily understood than had been the case with the Language Across the Curriculum policies of earlier decades. In particular this has involved teaching writing and reading through an understanding of text types. National Professional Development funding (1994-7) was instrumental in training a large number of school-based facilitators in pedagogical approaches utilizing a number of written text types. After this the Sydney Catholic Education Office developed a Secondary Writing Position Paper outlining the knowledge about text types already possessed by incoming Year 7 students as a result of the new English K-6 Syllabus, and explaining how secondary teachers could develop these further in their specific subjects. A Secondary Literacy Strategy for 1999-2001 was established to provide funding for school-based professional development and assistance in analyzing Year 7 ELLA (English Language and Literacy Assessment) test results and providing follow-up at cohort and individual level. The paper concludes with examples of changed pedagogy in Sydney Catholic secondary schools. (Author/RS)

How Has a Literacy Focus Changed Pedagogy Across the Curriculum in Sydney Catholic Secondary Schools: 1995-2000?

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Paper presented at the AATE/ALEA Joint National Conference in Hobart, 12-15 July 2001

Abstract

Prior to about 1995, few secondary teachers outside the English KLA in Sydney Catholic schools consciously focused on the development of literacy in their teaching approaches. By the mid '90s however, a number of educational perspectives (eg genre approaches, teaching/learning cycles integrating content with literacy skills, different students' learning styles, explicit methods of teaching literacy, etc.) had converged to produce pedagogical approaches that were more concrete and more easily understood than had been the case with the Language Across the Curriculum policies of earlier decades. In particular this has involved teaching writing and reading through an understanding of text types. National Professional Development funding (1994-7) was instrumental in training a large number of school-based facilitators in pedagogical approaches utilising a number of written text types. After this the Sydney Catholic Education Office developed a Secondary Writing Position Paper outlining the knowledge about text types already possessed by incoming Year 7 students as a result of the new English K-6 Syllabus, and explaining how secondary teachers could develop these further in their specific subjects. A Secondary Literacy Strategy for 1999-2001 was established to provide funding for school-based professional development and assistance in analysing Year 7 ELLA test results and providing follow-up at cohort and individual level.

(see <http://schoolsnet.syd.catholic.edu.au/Recsite/extrapages/literacy.htm>.) This paper will conclude with examples of changed pedagogy in Sydney Catholic secondary schools.

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A Personal Reminiscence – The Problem Factors

When I was teaching Modern History to senior students in the mid to late 1970s, I frequently experienced difficulties with students' literacy inadequacies in what was then an entirely essay-based subject. In this time prior to school-based assessment, students' final Higher School Certificate marks were based almost entirely on four 45 minute essays written under external examination conditions. Though a reasonably good writer myself, I found it very difficult to work out how to teach senior students how to plan, structure and write analytical essays, especially those students with poor literacy skills. Despite having been taught formal grammar and Latin, my understanding of writing was largely an intuitive one, based no doubt on having been an enthusiastic reader. The problems I faced in teaching senior students how to write were:

1. I had only a vague understanding of the kind of structure appropriate for analytical essays, and not being an experienced English teacher I lacked the 'language' to communicate this to my students.
2. Though I had an intuitive understanding of what language was inappropriate for this kind of essay, I was unable to explain to the students the conceptual language features that were appropriate.
3. I was afraid that if I spent too much time on literacy issues, I would not get through the History content that had to be taught in Years 11 and 12.

I believe my experience was typical of many teachers at the time, and indeed many since then. The current literacy focus on curriculum in Sydney Catholic secondary schools as well as in many systems and schools around Australia deals directly with these problems.

Literacy Approaches in Secondary Schools

By the early 1980s these issues, and more generally the importance of literacy for effective learning, were being responded to by the Language Across the Curriculum perspectives as well as by teachers of English as a Second Language. However, as with many of the cross-curriculum perspectives of this period, teachers agreed with the broad educational rationale without having a clear idea on how classroom practice should be adapted to incorporate them. For teachers of subjects other than English, Language Across the Curriculum perspectives and support materials were rarely of much help in suggesting ways to effectively change classroom practice. Moreover, these teachers felt the pressure of their covering their own subject content. There was little time left for teaching literacy skills, even if they had the motivation and ability to do so.

By the mid 1990s however a number of educational perspectives had converged to produce pedagogical approaches that were more concrete and more easily understood by non-English teachers. The genre approaches developed by Michael Halliday and further developed by Australian academics had been consolidated into a limited number of

factual and literary text types. Each text type could be defined in terms of its scaffold or structure and its distinctive language features. (This was precisely the kind of language understanding that would have helped me in the 1970s, especially if my students had been explicitly taught about text types in primary and junior secondary.) It was now clear that there were a number of the text types that were fundamental to subjects other than English, and were more appropriately taught in and through those subjects.

In addition, an adaptation of the teaching/learning cycle had been carried out to show how literacy could be integrated into the usual teaching and learning classroom strategies so that literacy teaching need not be additional to the subject content. A range of teaching strategies had been developed to allow this and they will be outlined later in this paper. (These strategies would have provided me with ways of ensuring that I covered the Modern History content while at the same time improving my students' literacy).

Reinforcement at Government and System Levels

At the same time, these developments were significantly reinforced at government and system levels. At the State level, the NSW English K-6 Syllabus released in the mid 90's was based on the explicit teaching of text types from the earliest years. Curriculum materials published by the Board of Studies and the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) for junior secondary students stressed the importance of teaching through text types in all subjects. A large portion of the Commonwealth-funded National Professional Development Program, managed by a consortium of government and non-government education systems in NSW, was devoted to training facilitators for school based professional development in Literacy Across the KLAs in Years 7-8[i]. The two focus areas of this professional development were:

- introduction to major non-literary text types used by students
- introduction to effective literary-based learning activities.

The Sydney Catholic Education Office developed a Writing Position Paper for its system of thirty-seven secondary schools in 1998[ii]. This paper explained how secondary teachers of all Key Learning Areas (KLAs) could build on the understanding of writing that their students had developed in primary school through their study of each text type. This understanding could be further developed by secondary teachers explicitly teaching the specific language demanded in different subject areas in terms of the text types and explaining how text types can be combined and adapted to meet the subjects' writing needs. The paper also outlined the elements of a Whole School Literacy Plan that each school should develop, and the school and KLA procedures that should accompany this plan.

A three year (1999-2001) Secondary Literacy Strategy was developed to support the Writing Position Paper. It had two main arms:

- the provision of system funds for release days to allow school-based professional development in the use of text types in teaching
- the use of Year 7 ELLA (English Language and Literacy Assessment) test results to diagnose students' literacy development at the individual and cohort level.

Impact of External Examinations

The introduction of new external examinations has provided a greater focus on literacy as well as useful data for monitoring students' literacy progress and difficulties.

Commonwealth Education Minister Kemp's requirement that funding to education systems be dependent on their demonstrating that their schools' students are achieving the Literacy Benchmarks has led to all Year 7 students in Sydney Catholic schools doing the Department of Education and Training ELLA test. This test yields extensive data on students' writing, reading and language abilities as they begin their secondary schooling. It allows teachers to identify students who need particular help, as well as cohort weaknesses that need to be addressed in the different subject areas.

Further literacy professional development has been provided by the Sydney Catholic Education Office in arranging for teachers in all subject areas to have experience marking students' written tasks from the ELLA test. Each student completes two pieces of writing in the ELLA test, one factual the other fictional. These tasks are generally based on a text type or a combination of text types. The tasks are each marked according to about sixteen criteria related to features from text level to paragraph, sentence and word level. In marking these pieces of writing teachers are required to clarify and sharpen their own understandings of language features, a valuable experience for their teaching of the language features appropriate to each text type[iii].

Changes to Classroom Practice in Secondary Schools

The changes to classroom practice in Sydney Catholic secondary schools as a result of these developments have been extensive but uneven. Most change has occurred, as might be expected, in Years 7 and 8 where teachers are more in touch with Primary teachers and literacy issues, and where the pressure to cover material for external examinations does not exist. This is also the area where most professional development has occurred. A key resource developed in 1999 to assist this professional development has been the Literacy Initiatives for Teachers (LIFT) kit.[iv] This kit, a Commonwealth funded project developed co-operatively by literacy experts and teachers from each of the NSW Catholic dioceses, contains processes and materials for a whole school approach to literacy. It includes:

- the use of diagnostic tools (including ELLA) for identifying the literacy needs of Year 7 students
- methods of programming, teaching and assessing with a literacy perspective
- case studies of processes and strategies used by Catholic schools implementing a whole school approach to literacy.

At the most basic level of changing classroom practice teachers understand the concept, structure and application of text types in relation to their own subject areas, and utilise this in their teaching of appropriate writing for their subjects. Teachers have been assisted in doing this by the DET curriculum materials they receive with the ELLA results. CEO Sydney Literacy Advisers estimate that 40-50% of teachers have reached this stage. A smaller proportion (10-20%) of teachers understand the language features characteristic to each text type and are able to integrate this understanding into their explanations and teaching. This understanding is significantly enhanced by participation in the ELLA marking experience.

A smaller but growing proportion (10%) of teachers use a range of communicative activities in their teaching to integrate literacy into their everyday teaching. An adapted teaching/learning cycle that allows teachers to integrate the teaching of content with the development of their students' literacy skills is used[v]. This approach involves teachers modelling the type of writing or speaking test that students are expected to produce, then jointly constructing these texts with students, and finally providing opportunities for independent construction of these texts by students. The various communicative activities which can be used in this approach rely on students being active and using language more than in traditional teacher-directed activities.

In addition to these fully integrated literacy strategies, teachers are addressing the more basic cohort weaknesses in literacy identified through ELLA in their everyday teaching. The diagnosis of these weaknesses at a whole school level is carried out by a literacy co-ordinator, committee or team. This person or (more often) group then decides which KLA or subject is the most appropriate one for remedying each weakness, and strategies for this are included in subject programs.

Future Directions and Challenges

Increasingly there is a recognition by teachers (especially in a place like Sydney where overall 50% of students come from homes where English is not the main language spoken at home, and in some schools the figure is as high as 98%) that teaching and learning is a language based activity. Hence all learning tasks require and involve literacy. An understanding of text types allows secondary teachers to understand the literacy skills students have been taught in primary school and how these literacy skills can be built on across the curriculum in secondary school.

In Sydney secondary Catholic schools, with the assistance of Commonwealth, State and System funded initiatives, this understanding has already led to more specific programming, teaching and assessment to encompass the literacy aspects of these tasks. The future development of this whole school literacy focus will require school structures such as literacy teams led by school executive members, effective teamwork by teachers implementing literacy strategies in their units and teaching, efficient and simple methods of recording and retrieving students' literacy data, and more effective utilisation of specialist support staff (eg ESL and Special Needs teachers) by all teachers.

It is these challenges that Sydney Catholic secondary schools face in consolidating the integration of literacy across the curriculum.

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